

VCPAC Feedback Submitted by representatives to the Budget Advisory Committee
March 6, 2023

VCPAC opposes any cuts to the 2023-24 SD61 school budget that targets student programming. Music, at the elementary and middle school levels, has been severely cut for the past two years. If we continue whittling away at it, we will have no program left.

AMIS, as a sub-committee of VCPAC, has spent more than two years researching and speaking with current and former music students, teachers, arts leaders in the community, parents, and other music specialists across the province. We have sent hundreds of letters and made multiple presentations to the Board of Education, citing how important these programs are to the district and the community at large. Music teachers and families are feeling untold stress at having to advocate for this program year after year. Parents and families have told the District that they overwhelmingly value music education for their students and they do not want to see further cuts to this program.

VCPAC does not understand why music is being targeted yet again for cuts for the third consecutive year. **We are requesting that at the March 9 BAC meeting that District Staff provide a rationale why they are proposing cuts to student programming in our District, that provide such clear mental health and socio-emotional benefits and why cuts to other areas are not being proposed.**

Below, we have provided our recommendations for Elementary and Middle School music, comments about each option, and suggestions for further research and analysis.

Elementary Strings Recommendations

1. Offer Elementary Strings to each school in the current format while exploring options to keep the program within the school day. Currently, 47% of Grade 5s participate in Elementary Strings, which speaks to how popular the program is. The current program which offers Elementary Strings in 24 schools has 15 classes offered **outside** the school schedule, which is not equitable or accessible to all Grade 5 students in the district. Note that the current level of funding was for 15 schools in the 2021-22 school year; the level of funding has not increased, despite the program being now offered in 24 schools.
2. Provide Principals with the choice between a prep time program and in-school instruction. The Music Review noted that a significant number of principals in the district found that the Elementary Strings program interfered with access to

learning in the classroom. If school admins do not want the Elementary Strings pullout program going forward in their schools, then individual participation in the prep model may be a way for them to still make the program available to students at their schools. (Strings does not have to be a one size fits all model.)

3. Offer a pilot program of five elementary schools to try out prep, if there is interest among five instrumental music teachers, principals and their school communities. This would give SD61 a chance to see the challenges and benefits of this model and to evaluate if it would be worthwhile to roll it out to the entire district. Note: Any pilot program would ideally run concurrently with the Strings program as is. This would be so that all students receive the same instrumental music opportunities in the District during a pilot program year.
4. Offer a pilot program to one family of schools to try a hub model. This could work if school communities, admins, school staffs, and music teachers agreed to be part of a pilot program to see what benefits and challenges there are to this model. Note: Any pilot program would need to run concurrently with the Strings program as is so that all students receive the same instrumental music opportunities in the District for the year in which the hub model is being piloted.

Comments About Each Option:

1. Keep as is:
 - VCPAC feels this is the most inclusive option for students currently, especially if offered inside school time. However, as noted above, we find it very concerning that 15/24 schools offer Strings outside the school day. This is not equitable or accessible to all Grade 5 students. **We strongly recommend that families and PACs be consulted on the schedule for their school community; this decision should not be made solely by principals and non-music teachers at our elementary schools.**
 - Other benefits include: Convenient for parents to have their children participate at their own schools; funding available to help with the cost of instruments; provides a sense of pride and comfort to have the program at their schools; specialist music instructors are already in place; performances are included, which is a necessity for instrumental music instruction and provides a link to the larger school community; Strings gives many families the opportunity to experience the benefits of music education who otherwise may not be able to afford it on their own privately.
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2. Hub model 5/10 sites:

Challenges:

- Students may face barriers to attending such a program and may not be able to travel to the hub sites. They may be participating in other activities during suggested times.
- Programming would almost certainly be in the evening since middle schools and high schools already have programming after school. They may not have space to run a hub model.
- There may be limits on how many students in the district could participate; there may be limits on teaching staff, especially with hubs that could have very large class sizes; specialist music teachers may not choose to stay in the district if the only opportunities for teaching this program were in the evenings.
- Participation rates in the program would likely drop as a result of this shift which may potentially affect the viability of the program going forward and would have an impact on Middle School Strings programs.

3. Prep:

Challenges:

- Not enough specialist teachers or instruments if offered to all Grade 5 and 4/ 5 split classes.
- Some schools would not have enough space to run this as a prep program.
- Possibly will eliminate FTE from general music teachers; how would that be reconciled?
- Students who may enjoy more comprehensive music instruction, may not want to learn Strings. What happens to students who do not want to do Strings?
- If schools decide they want to do a different prep due to the complicated nature of Strings, Elementary Strings disappears as a district program.

Ideas Worth Exploring and Researching:

- Explore if a prep scenario could include different instruments other than Strings. Perhaps each school community could pick within a group of instruments that worked best for them. The benefits of learning an instrument and reading music would still be there. One potential challenge would be trying to supply those particular instruments for all the children in the class – under the prep model, this should not be a cost that families need to absorb.
- Can an Indigenous focus be added to the Strings program to make it more inclusive to all students?

- Are there ways to explore a middle school mentorship program? Perhaps it could be used as part of a hub program? Can Grade 6/7 strings students mentor Grade 5 students?

Middle School Music Recommendations

1. Keep Middle School Music as is. This program promotes inclusivity and equity. We should not be cutting popular performing arts programs that are so critical to our students' mental health and well being. Music gives students connections; a sense of belonging; a place to feel comfortable; and the same teacher over several years, which studies show can be integral to student success.
2. If further cuts need to be explored, VCPAC recommends a 5 to 10 percent cut across the board in the district. If this is considered, these cuts need to be done in an equitable way, which means they should not proportionally affect students who depend on Inclusive Learning or who are Indigenous.

Comments About Each Option:

1. Keep as is:

Reasons We Should Keep the Program:

- Students already have faced changes in programming over the past two years; when music cuts began, students were in Grade 7. They will be entering high school and have only known cuts to music, which we know is a passion for many of them.
- Families and music teachers are feeling strain that these cuts are targeting music every year.
- Further cuts would mean a decrease in qualified staff = a decrease in class and program availability.

2. Reduce FTE by 20%

Challenges:

- Continuation of cuts would continue the precedent of chipping away at the program until it is gone.
- Already middle school music programs have cut choirs and strings programs at district schools. The program cannot sustain further deep cuts and remain a high quality, vibrant program.

3. Adjust FTE to the size of the school population starting at base FTE 7.0. (It is currently 8.82).

Challenges:

- Continuation of cuts would continue the precedent of chipping away at the program until it is gone.
- It is inequitable to base the FTE on the whole of the school population when it involves just one subject being taught. Not an accurate measurement of the students being affected by the cut.
- It is exclusionary to target school music programs based on size. Students are encouraged to go to catchment schools. If their neighbourhood school does not offer a music program with a larger FTE, it is inequitable for them to not have the same music opportunities that are offered at other schools.

4. Adjust FTE to levels of participation, (Note that this would increase the line item from where it currently is. Could go as high as 10.0 FTE.).

Challenges:

- The actual data broken down by school is not quite clear to us. We would like to have the data of each school and what the effects would be (how many teachers vs. how many students participating in music) before commenting any further.
- Again this feels discriminatory – it penalizes students who are not in the catchment of a strong music school; limits opportunities for them.

5. Exploratory Option (Would only have cost for choir and strings.)

Challenges:

- The potential to diminish existing programs (especially band) is high if students are only allowed to pick two exploratories for those that want to participate in band.
- Students would not be able to be in a band program for the full year, which would impact their music learning and would likely mean that some would not continue. This would impact high school music programs.
- The whole idea behind exploratories is to let middle school students explore a variety of subjects and passions. Limiting these options feels short sighted and does not give them the same learning opportunities that other students have.